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Tiny and Very Small Houses

by Andrés Oswill

When it comes to housing, some Portland residents are thinking small. Tiny (400 square feet or less) and very small houses are increasingly popular as accessory dwelling units (ADUs) on the property of existing family homes. Clusters of tiny houses can also be found in co-housing communities, the transitional housing community Dignity Village, and The Tiny House Hotel on NE Alberta.

The move to go small can be a lifestyle choice or a response to environmental and financial concerns. They might be having a moment, but very small homes are not new to Portland. There are a variety of these houses across the city, including housing built a century ago for stockyard workers in North Portland's Kenton neighborhood, manufactured housing in mobile home parks that have been part of the Portland landscape for decades, and historic homes in Portland's West Hills.

While the current surge of interest in tiny homes may seem innovative, it harkens back to practices long pursued out of necessity. When Iver Bohnsen built five one-bedroom houses on the corner of Southwest Vista and Elm in the 1920s, he was building units for individuals with limited resources, whose needs were not being met by market construction. Like today, the units came at a time when Portland was experiencing a population boom spurring new development across the city. Bohnsen's houses were unusual not just because of their size, but also because they were situated in an upscale residential

neighborhood, rather than among apartment complexes or commercial buildings. The houses were popular among singles, young couples, and widows, all groups with limited financial capacity.

Another example of small scale housing in the region is the workforce housing in the Kenton neighborhood. Kenton began as a company town for the Swift Meat Packing Company, with rail lines and industry driving the neighborhood's development. Denver Avenue became the dividing line for the neighborhood, with executive and high-end housing built to the east, and uniform, bungalow-style houses built to the west for workers. These houses were built small to keep them affordable for the company workers who lived in the neighborhood.

Historically, we see a connection between the Bohnsen houses and Kenton's worker housing with today's tiny homes. Very small houses have been most frequently developed out of necessity, not as the result of trendy lifestyles. With the ecological benefits of small footprint housing also comes a more pragmatic benefit — lower costs. While the increased interest in "tiny" or very small homes and ADUs is, for some, a lifestyle choice, for others it is simply a matter of affordability. And under current economic pressures, fewer of these older, more affordable very small houses are available as they, and the land they sit upon, have become targets for speculative redevelopment. **M**



This 1926 house on NE Killingsworth is 630 square feet.



Also built in 1926, the Bohnsen houses, on SW Vista and Elm streets are approximately 648 square feet.



This 1911 Kenton neighborhood house is just 520 square feet.



A new "tiny house" on wheels.